



Marga Altena, ***A True History Full of Romance: Mixed Marriages and Ethnic Identity in Dutch Art, News Media, and Popular Culture (1883-1955)*** (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 183 pp., ISBN 978 90 8964 425 1).

Marga Altena's fancifully titled book looks at a serious, important and complex issue – the representation of ethnic difference in mass media and art. Specifically, the book deals with three inter-ethnic marriages in the Netherlands in the period from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s.

This is not completely uncharted territory: there is some literature on mixed marriages and, to a far lesser degree, on the representation of such marriages in the media. Altena's approach is new and original thanks to her background as an art historian and her scrupulous reading of the sources. These sources however, are scarce. The cases deal with rare examples of inter-ethnic marriages that reached mass media. While the media depicted the weddings of the persons involved, it is much harder to obtain more information on the daily lives of the couples, particularly before they came into the limelight. As a result the choice of the cases was largely determined by the availability of sufficient sources. The extent to which they may be regarded as typical is of far less concern for the study.

The book asks how ethnicity was portrayed and investigates the specific interconnection of (illustrated) mass media and ethnicity. An interesting question posed by Altena is why inter-ethnic couples, who, due to social pressure, one would expect to stay away from publicity, stepped into the limelight. This is even more surprising as – regardless of the problem of ethnicity – around 1900 married women generally were not expected to play a visible role in public. Altena explains this phenomenon not only by hinting at the role of the media, but in particular by stressing the agency of the couples who more or less deliberately and skilfully used the media for their own purposes.

Each of the cases shows that the inter-ethnic weddings, initially, were rarely presented in a purely negative way. It is striking that media representation combined established stereotypes and very individualised information, both suiting mass media's needs for personalisation and simplification.

Nevertheless, all three examples also follow a very distinct logic. This is particularly true of the marriage of Mia Cuypers and Frederick George Taen Err Toung, who had

Chinese roots. The marriage took place in 1883, that is, around the time that is commonly understood to mark the breakthrough of mass media in continental Europe. The marriage stands out due to the social background of the wife. Cuypers was the daughter of Pierre Cuypers, one of the most renowned architects of his time and a leading member of the Catholic establishment in the Netherlands. It goes without saying that the high social status of the Cuypers family did not make it easier for them to accept what most contemporaries thought an obvious misalliance. However Altena shows that in the media, but also in the family, perception and judgment of the couple's marriage was far from unanimous. Altena highlights these tensions by focussing on a remarkable engagement portrait depicting Mia Cuypers in oriental dress, a portrait that became a media object in itself.

Certainly the marriage caused sensation, but not one that could be reduced to a merely negative scandal. In the news coverage of the event bewilderment and fascination with the exotic were mixed. In reporting marriages involving 'exotic' representatives of foreign cultures mass media raised topics that otherwise did not, or less prominently, enter the European discourse. At the same time mass media, with its tendency to simplify and dramatise, presented these facts in stereotypical form. Individuals were presented as dependent on their cultural background. The fact that Cuypers' marriage came to an end after only a few years was commonly understood to be the result of ethnic differences – and was also represented as such in a novel.

The second case, a couple who had to bridge an even wider cultural gap, adds additional evidence to this reading. This was the marriage in 1906 between Dutch Johanna van Dommelen, a single mother, and Angus Montour, known as American Horse, a Canadian of Indian descent. The couple met at a performance of the Indian show with which Montour travelled Europe. Again, the wedding featured prominently in the media with the couple playing an even bigger part in defining what was reported than in the first case discussed. Nevertheless stereotypes reducing the couple to their ethnic identity played a major role. Intense media coverage continued even after both left for Canada. The couple continued to use the dramatic potential of their marriage to gain media attention and thus publicity, e.g. to promote the issue of Indian emancipation.

What Altena calls the 'melding of rejection and fascination' in media reporting is also to be found in the third case, the marriage in 1927 between Joseph Sylvester of Saint Lucia origin, who had worked as market salesman in Hengelo, and Marie Borchert. Focusing on Sylvester's black skin, this marriage is the one example in which the public reception was most closely bound to stereotypes. The couple was continuously reduced to the black-and-white difference, a simplification that particularly harmed the wife. However the Sylvester couple was also able to use and influence the media, not least in blending the personal dimension with commercial interest.

In her meticulous interpretation of images and text Altena does a fine job in highlighting the agency of the couples in question. This goes against the common assumption that minorities were unable to influence their image in the media, but Altena

makes clear that the Dutch situation was not an easy one. Comparatively well developed tolerance in the colonies, with numerous interethnic communities, was in contrast to the situation in the Netherlands where inter-ethnic marriages were scarcely tolerated. This was even more so for those couples in which the woman was white. One argument even ran that in marriages with foreigners from less advanced backgrounds women had to be protected against the loss of what women's emancipation had achieved.

This book will certainly be of interest for historians of media, in particular illustrated mass media, as well as art historians and historians of migration. One of the strong points of the book is that the author constantly reflects on her sources, including the numerous oral narratives from relatives of her subjects. In so doing a personal narrative with interesting questions of memory comes to the fore.

The three examples are fascinating in themselves, but stressing the specifics of each case and the agency of the individual actors also limits the potential for more general insights. A stronger hierarchy of the arguments made would have been desirable. Altena argues that mass media both reflected and shaped ideas about ethnicity. This is very probable, but based on just three cases and confined mostly to the level of the media themselves, and less the reception of their coverage, it is hard to prove this point. Due to the limitation of only three cases – justified in view to the sources – it opens more perspectives than it provides definite answers. Given that research into these questions is still in a nascent state this hardly comes as a surprise. Altena demonstrates that combining the issue of ethnicity and mass media is a field of study with a great potential.

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